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ABSTRACT

A survey collected recorded library circulation statistics for 241 four-year liberal arts colleges and universities. While the survey identified several libraries with comparatively high circulation averages, it also indicated that for a great many institutions the per student rate of circulation books remains about the same as it was over 35 years ago. (Author/NR)

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RECORDED LIBRARY USE STATISTICS FOR FOUR-YEAR LIBERAL ARTS INSTITUTIONS, 1973/74

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Abstract

The results of a recent survey of recorded library circulation statistics for four-year liberal arts colleges and universities are summarized. Since the survey was quite extensive, involving usable responses from 241 libraries, the results should be of general interest to academic librarians. While on the one hand the survey identified several libraries with comparatively high circulation averages, on the other hand it indicated that for a great many institutions the per student rate of circulation of library books remains about the same as it was over thirty-five years ago.

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RECORDED LIBRARY USE STATISTICS FOR FOUR-YEAR LIBERAL ARTS INSTITUTIONS, 1973/74

During the summer and fall of 1974, a survey was made of library circulation statistics for four-year liberal arts colleges and universities in the United States. The purpose of the survey was to identify institutions whose recorded circulation statistics were significantly above average, so that those institutions might be studied in greater detail in an attempt to discover factors which contribute to high library usage among undergraduate students. This work is a part of the author's doctoral studies at the University of Oklahoma. A summary of the results of the survey is herein reported.

It was decided at the outset that the survey would be limited to four-year liberal arts institutions, both private and public, which offer programs leading to the baccalaureate degree. Colleges and universities with graduate work of any kind were thus excluded. It was further decided to limit the study to schools with enrollments of 750 or more full-time-equivalent students. By consulting the Education Directory, 1973-74, Higher Education (U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education, 1974), 376 schools with these characteristics were identified. A brief questionnaire was prepared and mailed, along with an explanatory cover letter, to the library director of each of these 376 institutions. Completed questionnaires were returned from 310 of the libraries, for a return rate of 82.4 percent.

From this questionnaire, the following information was gained for each institution: (1) the Fall, 1973 enrollment in full-time-equivalent students, (2) the total number of volumes in the library at the beginning of the 1973/74

academic year, and (3) the total number of books charged to students by the library during the 1973/74 academic year (the long session, from September to May or June)--for both general circulation and reserve books. From this information it was easy to calculate (1) the number of volumes per student held by each library, and (2) the average number of books per student charged by each library during the academic year. In addition, the questionnaire asked for the length of the normal loan period for general-circulation books and the type of academic calendar observed by the institution.

In reviewing the returned questionnaires, it quickly became apparent that a number of reporting libraries would have to be excluded for various reasons. In the first place, 35 of the returns reported actual enrollments of less than 750 full-time-equivalent students. Second, a few libraries had unusually long loan periods for general-circulation books--such as an entire term or semester. Since extremely long loan periods tend to lower circulation figures, it was decided to eliminate these libraries from the study. In the third place, some libraries were unable to separate their own student circulation figures from the total circulation count--including faculty, staff, and community usage, and in some cases, the usage of students from neighboring institutions. Also, some were unable to separate reserve books from general-circulation books. After all of these libraries were excluded, the list was reduced from 310 to 250 libraries. Several months later, a follow-up questionnaire to all libraries reporting above-average circulation figures revealed a few additional discrepancies, so that the list was finally reduced to 241 libraries.

In tabulating the data from the returns, it was further apparent that the libraries varied widely in the manner in which they treated reserve books.

While some libraries counted all reserves used, others counted only those charged for overnight use outside the library. Several did not bother to count reserve books at all. Therefore, it was decided to eliminate reserve book figures from this stage of the investigation and to rely instead on books circulated from the general collection. There was a greater degree of uniformity in the way these books were treated. Most of the libraries--with the exception of those, mentioned above, which were excluded because of unusually long loan periods--reported loan periods of from two to four weeks in length.

The general-circulation statistics for the 241 libraries were then analyzed, with emphasis being placed on the average number of books charged per student for the academic year. The range, mean, median, and standard deviation were calculated for these figures. Thus, it was determined that the mean number of books charged per student per year for all institutions was 16.68. The range was quite extreme--from a low of 1.4 books per student per year at one school to a high of 44.5 at another. The median was 16.3, and the standard deviation was 7.26.

The frequency distribution of these circulation averages is depicted in Figure 1. The distribution is somewhat positively skewed, with a few libraries by themselves in the upper limits of the distribution. In fact, seven libraries had per capita circulation averages which were more than two standard deviations above the mean, while three of these reported averages which were more than three standard deviations above the mean.

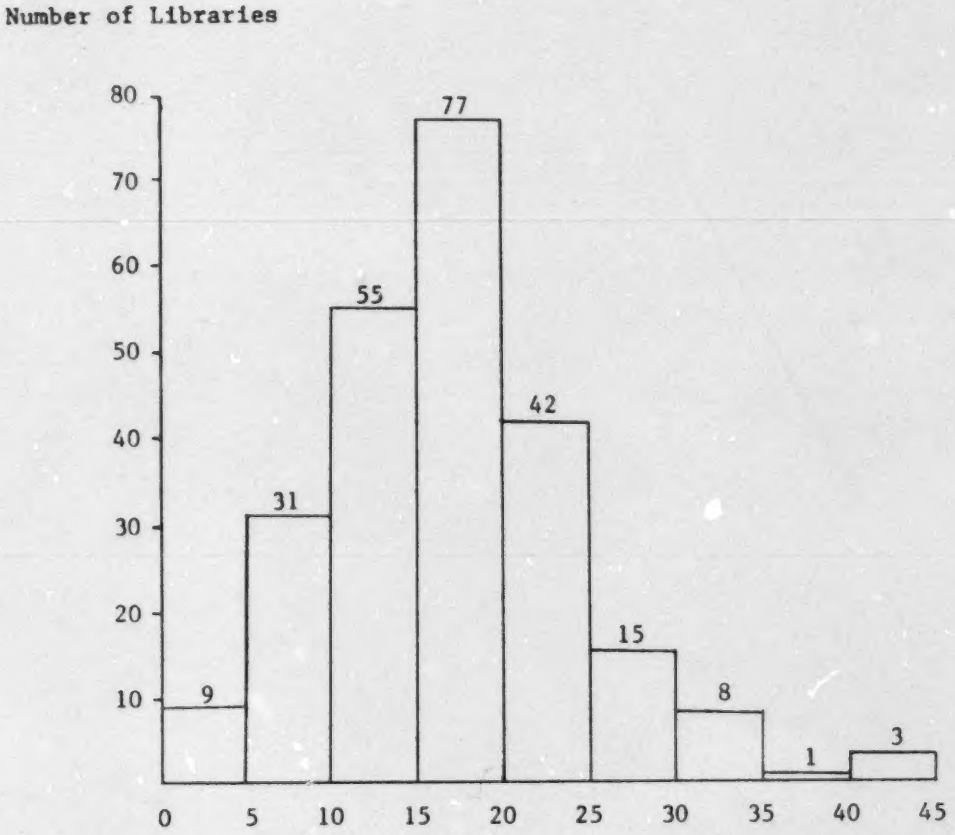

Fig.1--Histogram Showing Number of Books Charged per Student per Year (Grouped in Intervals of Five) by Number of Libraries Reporting.

While the chief purpose of this survey was to identify high-circulation libraries, a few additional observations may be made. In the first place, when the collected statistics are arranged according to the size of the reporting institutions, as in Table 1, some noteworthy comparisons may be seen. For example, the figures in the Table reveal that the smaller schools have higher averages both in volumes held per student and

in the number of books charged per student than do the larger schools. In fact, the average recorded circulation per student for the smallest schools (750-999 FTE enrollment) is almost twice that of the largest schools (above 3,000 FTE enrollment). It would, indeed, be interesting to know whether this inverse relationship of recorded circulation averages to institutional size is typical of American institutions of higher education as a whole.

TABLE 1

LIBRARY SURVEY STATISTICS ACCORDING TO SIZE OF INSTITUTIONS

Size of Schools: FTE Enrollment	Number of Schools	Ave. Number of Volumes Held by Library	Ave. Number of Volumes per Student	Ave. Number Books Charged per Student per Year
750-999	65	79,209	92.2	19.12
1,000-1,499	90	102,534	86.5	16.97
1,500-1,999	45	113,510	66.5	16.07
2,000-2,999	29	114,098	48.9	14.09
3,000-8,569	12	162,304	37.5	9.93
Total Population	241	102,658	77.3	16.68

Another observation is that these circulation averages seem to be in line with the findings of a number of studies of undergraduate library usage made over the past four decades. The basic investigation in this series was conducted by Harvie Branscomb during the year 1937/38.[1] He analyzed seven previous studies involving 51 colleges and universities and more than 20,000 students and found that "the average student draws from the general collection of his college or university about 12 books per year." Further analysis revealed, however, that a small percentage of the students accounted for the

bulk of the circulation, while the majority made only negligible use of the library. Thus, the average number of books withdrawn per student would have been much lower than 12 per year, were it not for a minority of students who withdrew a great many books. Branscomb concluded that undergraduate students in general do not make very much use of the library, "not nearly so much as is ordinarily assumed."[2] Since the 1930's, numerous studies have tended to substantiate Branscomb's findings, such as those by Knapp (1959), Weatherford (1961), Barkey (1965), Lane (1966), Ritter (1968), and Lubans (1970).[3]

The per capita circulation averages revealed in the present survey compare favorably with the averages found by Branscomb and later investigators. While academic library collections have grown tremendously in the 35 years since Branscomb's basic study, the recorded circulation of library materials, as reflected in this survey, does not seem to have increased significantly. For example, whereas the mean per capita circulation for all 241 institutions was 16.68 per year, approximately 40 percent of the institutions reported circulation averages of fewer than 15 books per student per year, while 17 percent circulated fewer than 10 books per student per year (see Figure 1). Such statistics seem to indicate that there are still many institutions where the library does not play a very significant role in the instructional program.

Although reserve book circulation figures were not included in the above analysis, an observation concerning reserves might prove interesting. Branscomb, in 1937/38, found that in addition to the books withdrawn from the general collection, the "undergraduate, on the average, seems to make from 50 to 60 withdrawals per year from the reserve book collection."[4] In the present survey, 204 libraries reported reserve book circulation figures, and for these the average number of reserves charged per student for the academic

year was only 5.98. Thus, it would appear that the use of reserve books in liberal arts colleges is not nearly so extensive today as it once was.

Finally, this investigator is aware that some librarians tend to discount recorded circulation statistics as an indicator of library usage. Three of the librarians who responded to this survey expressed such an opinion. This attitude is usually based on the fact that such statistics ignore the use of materials within the library--which undoubtedly is substantial in many institutions. However, this study accepts the viewpoint of various other investigators, such as Branscomb, Knapp, Lubans (all mentioned above), and Lyle (1961)[5], who regard circulation statistics as one important indicator of the use being made of the library. And, apparently, there are many librarians who feel the same way. The very fact that this survey elicited a response from more than 82 percent of the libraries involved shows a high degree of interest in the subject. Furthermore, over 100 of the responding librarians requested a copy of the results of the survey, while several indicated they were extremely interested in such studies.

In conclusion, this survey has demonstrated that there is still a substantial interest in and regard for circulation statistics as an indicator of student library usage. However, it also has shown that there is little uniformity in the way such statistics are collected and treated. This problem was underscored by the number of responding libraries which had to be excluded from the survey analysis because of discrepancies in the reporting of the figures, as well as by the fact that reserve book figures could not be used at all in the analysis. One of the respondents directly addressed this problem by asking: "Why don't librarians have a standard form of statistics and all stick to it?" Obviously, it will be difficult to interpret such statistics

and see much meaning in them until there is a greater degree of standardization in their treatment.

In a general sense, the circulation statistics reported in the present survey give added support to a conclusion already reached in a long line of similar studies, namely, that many undergraduate students are failing to make maximum use of academic libraries. While on the one hand these statistics identify a few libraries with relatively high circulation averages, on the other hand they indicate that there are still many institutions which report a record of low library usage among undergraduate students.

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